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DEPARTMENT FOR H - PLEASE PASS TO CODEL NELSON  
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [OREP](#) [MARR](#) [SNAR](#) [SL](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL NELSON DECEMBER 15 VISIT TO  
SIERRA LEONE

REF: STATE 128396

1. (U) Embassy Freetown looks forward to welcoming you to Sierra Leone. Your visit comes at a prescient time in our bilateral relationship with the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), as we attempt to support its ongoing efforts to re-build and flourish. Sierra Leone is known worldwide as a country beset with challenges, many of which are the result of the brutal decade-long civil war that destroyed infrastructure and truncated political, social, and economic development. The country currently sits last on the UN's Human Development Index due to high unemployment, the worst mother-child mortality rates in the world, and widespread illiteracy. Despite this background, however, Sierra Leone is of significant strategic interest to the USG:

-- It is the most stable country in the Mano River Union (MRU), and instrumental in helping to maintain peace and security;

-- Sierra Leone is a model for post-conflict reconstruction, one of two countries chosen for the UN's pilot Peace Building program;

-- The 2007 Presidential Elections and 2008 Local Council Elections, both judged free and fair by international observers, occurred with limited violence and peaceful transitions. These elections are considered a model for the continent;

-- Sierra Leone is an ally with the USG on critical issues. For example, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) immediately and publicly recognized Kosovo's independence following its secession;

-- The GoSL is becoming a leader in international forums, such as the AU and the UN, and is actively promoting human rights issues through multilateral engagement. Sierra Leone co-sponsored the U.S. Zimbabwe Resolution, and was one of few African countries to make public statements against the violence there;

-- There is strong political will to combat narcotics trafficking in Sierra Leone and throughout the sub-region;

-- Despite the pervasive culture of corruption, the GoSL has taken significant steps to combat it, including passing one of the toughest anti-corruption laws in Africa;

-- The GoSL is actively engaged in assisting with counter-terrorism efforts.

2. (U) Though the GoSL is making strong attempts to escape the "Blood Diamond" branding and soar as a regional leader in democracy, human rights, and governance, the country is highly vulnerable to failure. Economic, social, internal, and

regional insecurity, coupled with insufficient capacity, have a negative impact on progress. It would not be in the USG interest to have GoSL efforts falter, impacting our bilateral and multilateral relations and priorities. Picking up the pieces after another bloody conflict would be more costly than to fully provide assistance so desperately needed now. The following paragraphs outline issues of critical concern to USG interests.

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ECONOMIC INSECURITY  
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¶3. (SBU) The civil war destroyed the country's infrastructure, including physical and human capital, and the process of rebuilding is a long and arduous one. A country known for its natural resources has neither the capability to effectively harness them nor the capacity to regulate others intent on exploiting them. Unemployment is estimated at 70%, with no industrial or manufacturing employment prospects for unskilled and skilled workers. The borders of the formal economy are constantly receding to make way for the informal, where regulation, taxation, and legitimacy are non-existent. In this environment, poverty is an endemic killer. A nation rendered fragile by the impacts of war feels external market shocks more keenly. This level of desperation creates opportunities for heightened criminal activity, and bilateral assistance requests to countries whose true motives are unknown.

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REGIONAL INSECURITY

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¶4. (SBU) Though Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia are persevering in their struggles to rebuild after their respective conflicts, the situation in Guinea appears to be ever-worsening. Given the porous nature of Sierra Leone's borders with its neighboring states, as well as the close historic, familial, and economic ties between them, insecurity in one country quickly spills over into another. For Sierra Leone, the MRU's current bastion of peace, heightened tensions in Guinea drive people over the border, though Sierra Leone has no capacity to support refugees. An increase in organized crime in one country can also lead to an upswing in similar activity in another, and smuggling contraband such as narcotics and arms is known to occur throughout the MRU. External forces such as these threaten Sierra Leone's fragile internal security. Through the Department of Defense, the USG works strenuously with the military and larger security sector to build capacity to protect Sierra Leone's land and coastal borders.

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INTERNAL INSECURITY  
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¶5. (U) Economic hardships are a significant destabilizing force. The massive unemployment, particularly among the nation's youth population whose education was interrupted by war, leaves many angry and idle individuals more than willing to make mischief or worse. Easily manipulated, the "unemployed youth" cohort is responsible for political violence and petty and violent crime. The Sierra Leone Police, riddled with systemic corruption, hampered by virtually no resources, and lacking the most basic training and equipment, is poorly matched against a hungry population already sensitized to brutality. Though a peaceful country at the moment, battle fatigue could dissipate as economic deprivation worsens. If the delicate balance supporting stability wavers, the GoSL has few resources with which to quell violence and insurgency. The USG supports training initiatives for the police, and the Embassy hopes to provide additional technical assistance in FY09.

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NARCOTICS  
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¶6. (SBU) An element of both regional and internal insecurity concerns, narcotics trafficking through Sierra Leone to Europe is on the rise. The largest cocaine bust in the country's history took place in July, 2008, netting over 700kg. of premium cocaine and 21 suspects of Sierra Leonean, South American, and American citizenship. The size and sophistication of this trafficking attempt indicates a well-organized syndicate which has likely used Sierra Leone as a staging ground for its criminal activity in the past. The fragility of the governance and judicial structures, coupled with economic insecurity, makes Sierra Leone highly vulnerable for further narcotics trafficking, especially as USG and others focus on neighboring countries. Without constant vigilance, Sierra Leone is at-risk for increased organized crime. The Embassy seeks additional funding in FY09 to support the GoSL in their efforts, to include such activities as strengthening their National Anti-Drug law, providing judicial assistance, and equipping and training the Joint Drug Interdiction Task Force.

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ANTI-CORRUPTION  
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¶7. (U) The President made a "zero tolerance for corruption" campaign pledge in 2007, and made good on that promise during his first year in office. Placing great confidence in Abdul Tejan-Cole, new Commissioner of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the President has supported a revamping of the ACC organization, the passage of a revised Anti-Corruption Act (signed into law September 1), became the first Sierra Leonean Head of State to declare his assets, and forced every ministry to include anti-corruption activities in their missions and strategic plans. Though no charges under the new law have been brought yet, the ACC is actively investigating and prosecuting prominent current and former government officials. The Embassy liaises regularly with the ACC, and plans to support training and technical assistance in the areas of forensic accounting and extraditions.

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SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE (SCSL)  
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¶8. (U) The SCSL, funded by voluntary contributions from UN member states, is responsible for prosecuting the primary leaders of rebel groups during the war. Former Liberian president Charles Gankay Taylor stands before the SCSL in The Hague on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The AFRC and CDF trials, including appeals, are complete, with the accused found guilty of numerous counts and sentenced to prison terms ranging from 15 to 40 years. Final arguments in the RUF trial concluded in August, with a judgment expected within weeks. The USG is the largest contributor to the SCSL, of \$60 million to date, and is actively encouraging the Court to complete its mandate according to the agreed-upon schedule in 2010.

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STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT (SOFA)  
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¶9. (SBU) Having languished on various GoSL desks for several years, signing the SOFA agreement is a current Embassy concern. The issue has been raised at the highest levels, and though promises of movement were recently made, there are no signs of actual progress. Finalizing this agreement is a critical priority for the USG, so that increased military assistance can begin to be provided.

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USG ASSISTANCE  
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¶10. (U) Assistance efforts focus on building institutional capacities through: strengthening good governance and consolidating peace and security through democratic political processes; supporting economic growth and private sector investment, particularly in the productive agriculture and natural resources sectors; and, reducing food insecurity and increasing the standard of living through developmental food aid. USAID is just starting to implement the Promoting Agriculture, Governance and Environment Program (PAGE) as a means to assist Sierra Leone in promoting good governance and transparency while also impacting agricultural and environmental productivity and increased access to markets. This is a 4-year \$13 million project. Although not a PEPFAR country, Sierra Leone was the recipient of \$500,000 in FY08 for HIV/AIDS education for awareness building around prevention and treatment and to strengthen the health system for improved and reliable HIV/STD surveillance assessment. Other USG assistance efforts include funding for trafficking in persons, child labor, refugee assistance, special self-help grants to communities, and IMET.

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CONCLUSION  
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¶11. (U) Again, Embassy Freetown looks forward to your visit on December 15. Though your time in Sierra Leone is limited, the targeted meetings with President Koroma, members of the government's security sector, and USG staff will give you valuable insight into the pressing issues facing the country's continued development and further entrench our bilateral relationship.  
PERRY